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ABSTRACT

The field of educational technology was built on the positivist, modernist search for a best medium towards universal communication and the teaching of predetermined behavior and thinking patterns. Once, this medium was thought to be motion pictures, then television, then programmed instruction, and today it is hoped that it will be instructional systems development, intelligent tutoring systems, and microcomputers. The past emphasis of educational technology on automated delivery systems favors the biases of the industrial, scientific, modern era. However, postmodernism is a philosophic approach that questions all dimensions, including the positivist, scientific paradigm of linear progress. In the postmodern context there is no one best way to communicate and to educate. To realize this is to begin to think as a postmodernist. Postmodern thinking has entered the mainstream of educational technology theory and practice. It can no longer be perceived as neutral or as leading inevitably to progress. The hidden power within educational technology can influence education, training, curriculum, and people. Yet it can make a difference through rigorous philosophic thinking, rethinking, deconstructing and criticizing. In short, educational technology is becoming postmodern. (15 references) (Author/BBM)

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ERIC Digest

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by

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ERIC DIGEST

September 1992

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Postmodern Educational Technology

By Denis Hlynka and Andrew R.J. Yeaman[1,2]

Introduction

Postmodernism is a contemporary philosophic approach concerned with the multiple and contradictory ways of knowing in this historically postmodern time (Jencks, 1989). As such, the postmodern condition is becoming a significant force in educational technology, especially when instruction and training are treated as commodities (Fox, 1991).

Definitions

Postmodernism is "post" to the modernity of the industrial age. To Habermas, modernism is an incomplete project which relates a culture to its past through a transition from old to new (1983). Modernity to Lyotard means any scientific or technological activity legitimized by a grand myth or "metanarrative" (1989). The defining characteristics of modernity seem to be a faith in science, in the positive benefits of technology, and in the belief progress is inevitable and good.

Given the above definition of modernism, what is postmodernism? To Habermas, postmodernism is "antimodernism." To Lyotard, postmodernism is an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (mythlike social justifications). The defining characteristics of postmodernity are plurality, ironic double-coding, critique of metanarratives, and recognition that if there are multiple ways of knowing then there must be multiple truths.

There is much dissatisfaction with the modernist, positivist, scientific world. Science and technology had their chance but failed to deliver. They were accompanied by unexpected side effects. Nuclear energy was to provide cheap, clean power and not cause the Chornobyl disaster. Household cleaners and fuels were to make things better and not create a hole in the ozone layer. Similarly, ethnocultural groups which had once been defeated and conquered have re-emerged. As a consequence it is no longer a question of whether my view is more useful than yours. No longer does "might make right." At the very least, postmodernism confronts and exposes political overtones within information.

Postmodern Educational Technology

Producing information is a major economic force that ties postmodern theory to educational technology. The computerized society discussed in Lyotard's foundational report (1989) requires a postmodern educational technology. The field of educational technology was built on the positivist, modernist search for a best medium towards universal communication and the teaching of predetermined behavior and thinking patterns. Once it was thought to be motion pictures, then television, then programmed instruction, and today it is hoped to be instructional systems development, intelligent tutoring systems and microcomputers. The past emphasis of educational technology on automated delivery systems favors the biases of the industrial, scientific, modern era. However, the postmodern is a philosophic approach that questions all dimensions, including the positivist, scientific paradigm of linear progress. In the postmodern context there is no one best way to communicate and to educate. To realize this is to begin to think as a postmodernist.

How to be a Postmodernist

1. Consider concepts, ideas and objects as texts. Textual meanings are open to interpretation.
2. Look for binary oppositions in those texts. Some usual oppositions are good/bad, progress/tradition, science/myth, love/hate, man/woman, and truth/fiction.
3. "Deconstruct" the text by showing how the oppositions are not necessarily true.

First Subheading

How can a linear medium such as an ERIC Digest represent the postmodern? The Digest genre frames postmodern educational technology inside tradition. The unity of traditional text, one item followed by another, must be challenged here by textual interplay.

Our purpose is to give you a taste of the postmodern. Your reading should be an experience in going beyond control and prediction. On the page you see not one seamless piece of joint authored prose but two columns that convey difference. Does reading this affect your reading of that? The visibility of separate texts as graphic elements may bring you to participate in the message. How do the stories on this sheet of paper relate to each other? Do you seek another tale of limp french fries (Hlynka, 1991) or are your eyes drawn to computer screen experiments XXXX XX XXX XXXX XXXXXX XXXXX? Should be left for your metaphysics? Should that be [redacted]? Can you feel the postmodern irreverence for modernistic oppositions?

Communication as a convergence of minds is an ideal seldom reached. What is remarkable is the agreement that it happens. Often the telephone metaphor of communication breaks apart and the unified text of authority is revealed as an illusion. Similarly, the commonsense of the systems approach to message design may be questioned. Although educational technology manipulates behavior into performance, it seeks to manipulate thinking, too. Why is there this belief that telling people something changes what they do, say and think? Postmodern dilemmas like

[1]The order of names is alphabetical.

[2]This Digest's parallel structure is intended to be both explanatory and postmodern. Our ideal is for every reader to identify gaps and paradoxes.

4. Identify texts which are absent, groups who are not represented and omissions, which may or may not be deliberate, but are important.

Characteristics of Postmodern Educational Technology

1. A belief in pluralism. There is no one best technology of communication in education.
2. An emphasis on criticism rather than evaluation. Educational technology needs critics to turn its innovations upside down, backwards and forwards. We need to find dysfunctions as well as functions.
3. A focus on constantly rethinking and deconstructing our beliefs, tools and technology.

Conclusion

Postmodern thinking has entered the mainstream of educational technology theory and practice. Recently 26 major critical writings were assembled that address the postmodern interpretation of educational technology (Hlynka & Belland, 1991). Educational technology can no longer be perceived as neutral or as leading inevitably to progress. The hidden power within educational technology influences education, training, curriculum and people. Yet educational technology can make a difference through rigorous philosophic thinking, rethinking, deconstructing and criticizing. In short, educational technology is becoming postmodern.

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these cause educational technologists to read present day philosophers such as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard.

Second Subheading

It is also appropriately postmodern to have and to establish biases: Who is doing what to you? While the advantages of systematic design are clear to its advocates, instruction is not a science but is creative and artistic (Yeaman, 1990). Talk of scientific paradigm shifts in educational technology sounds like a suspiciously modernist metanarrative. In contrast, the postmodern view supports a humanistic way of knowing with criticism as its mode of operation.

The humanities are the major source of postmodern thought. Consequently it is in teaching English, languages, literature, social studies and related subjects that the largest influence is felt. The postmodern in the classroom fits with liberatory, radical instruction as critical pedagogy. Postmodern perspectives on media and communication are thereby developing new sensibilities for educational technology to consider. Philosophy, once safely imprisoned in higher education, has escaped into our schools and training centers.

Third Subheading

This essay closes with the self consciousness of author-reader relations. Looking into the future, someone may greet us like this at a conference:

"Good to see both of you. I enjoyed your ERIC Digest on postmodern educational technology."

"Thank you."

"Tell me, is postmodernism the latest paradigm for the field or has something else come along?"

One of us makes an ironic joke about modernism:

"We are considering a new computer model for educational efficiency and productivity. It shows the square root of the instructional material covered is proportionate to the sum of the baseline interactivity and the cognitive architecture. It's based on the early research by Pythagoras with right-angled triangles."

Everyone laughs (but at different jokes) and the other of us concludes:

"However, linear, homogeneous, authoritarian versions of reality are drawing postmodern responses known by ambiguity, multiplicity and imagination."

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